

Michael Chekhov

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ATMOSPHERE  
CHARACTERIZATION  
THE IDEAL PERFORMANCE

Criticism of Run-through of The Possessed:

We are always driving towards our aim of the ideal performance. We have come to the unanimous conclusion that you have made a great improvement, individually and in general. In general, the more you act the whole play through, the more you act, even subconsciously, certain things which you cannot get otherwise. It gives you definitely a certain ground, intangible, but very firm. Therefore, we have decided that if we are going to rehearse this play, we must do it in two ways: every day in the morning we will rehearse the whole play through. You must act the play through every day so that you will have it in your arms, hands, and brains.

ATMOSPHERE:

The weakest point today was the atmospheres. All the scenes were somehow alike. The ideas are clear, but still it becomes dull because it is always the same. The performance has no soul - it has a brain now, but it must have a soul and that is always the atmosphere. You must be absolutely aware of each scene from the point of view of the atmosphere.

Today you have had a certain activity which was not diminished. I have been afraid of this, but now I see that it is possible. You must have such activity and keep it. Without this activity the play disappears immediately from the heart of the audience.



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The Meeting scene was first class because of its atmosphere and tremendous activity. If you will take it as a pattern, you will be right. The characters were much clearer, and the line which the character takes during the play was also there.

#### CHARACTERIZATION:

In the beginning Verkhevinski was too low and weak. The first scene was without objective and was only spoken. The atmosphere of the first scene is fiery conspiracy. This was not there. You simply spoke the ideas, and gave expression to them; but the actor did not burn. It was right for you to fall down after the Meeting scene, but you failed to climb up before it. You must strive and fight for your ideas. The primitive thing should be to the meeting, and from the meeting.

Stavrogin was not so good at the beginning, but better at the end. Why? Because you have forgotten the most important thing - you are not a real incorporated man and personality - you are a phantom which leads everyone astray, and Stavrogin as well. You do not exist. You are an incorporated idea, but not a man of heart, blood, and temperament. Shatov is a full-blooded personality. We see that he is pale and agitated, we see that his whole life has been taken by this current in the world. Stavrogin cannot be this - he must be absolutely pale, with big beautiful eyes which look



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at problems in empty space - spiritual problems. He has no real sound connections anywhere - he is always an incorporated idea, a phantom, but not yet a human being.

This is absolutely important because of the idea of the idol. All such idols - Hitler, for instance, is not a figure. You will not find a single human thing in him. Stavrogin is a spiritual phantom, but Hitler is a material phantom - a phantom, and not a human being at all. All such idols are phantoms, and it is essentially important to have this walking lying phantom around which different beings are doing their business.

Philosophically and rhythmically, and for the composition of the play and the characters, you must be a figure which is transparent. When Verkhevovski looks into your eyes, he is lost because he does not see anything there - your eyes are transparent. All fanatics are transparent because they are looking introspectively, and they disappear into a certain inner nothing, and they become non-existent.

When Stavrogin begins to speak too earthily on the stage, he immediately becomes a man and a human being and immediately the question arises, "Why are they so concerned with him?" We can see a young, handsome master around us - it is not yet the ideal, the person for whom Lisa is out of her senses because she is attracted to this strange, mysterious emptiness of the ideal. For instance, in the Nightmare



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scene, it cannot be that he speaks physically - he must strive with the ideas, not with the earthy facts. Today it was too earthy. Take away gradually this thing of the earth quality. Stavrogin has actually no relationship to anyone.

When he becomes personal or warm towards anyone, it is wrong - he is surrounded by an empty space all the time.

Shatov was absolutely right and good. If you, Blair, can get this real excitement and fire which you had today and bring it into the scene with Stavrogin, it would be good. If you will try to imagine the scene that is right, and then start with the scene which is wrong, it will help you. The lack of activity which we expect makes all the difference - it is without soul.

Catherine as Martha. It is very right and good and very charming. Try to find the transitions between each sentence and each emotion much more quickly - it is too slurred. You must give each thing to the audience in different colors - one red, one green, one black, and so on. Go over all your sentences, and see what is the real color of the sentence, and then change and take another color. Because Martha is not a person who has had a long life experience and has got accustomed to hiding her feelings with lies. She is an absolutely naive and fresh person. It is her soul which is exposed, and we must see this soul and how the processes are going on there without any veil. She is just the opposite from Lisa,



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who lies with each sentence and that is her main-spring. But Martha has no idea of this - she must show her uncovered, sparkling human soul - it is sparkling with thousands of colors, and she is without any human ability to lie and to cover it. When we see such a naive and clear person, we must see a sparkling soul, otherwise you will not be understood as Martha.

Beatrice as Lisa: Everything is right and correct. Everything is there, but without fire. You are correct but not inspired. Today we saw only the formula. Try to use the Method for getting inspiration.

Hurd as Kirilov: It is again correct, but in another sense. You got your character because you are a character actor. But sometimes you "swim" beyond the point. There are certain limits. Today you were not catching the ideas which are going away from Kirilov - you were too sure and too quiet. Kirilov is too sensitive - every word, every sound gives him a lot of ideas which he cannot catch. In the first scene - "Life is pain, life is fear," - and he is nobody. In the second scene he is absolutely happy, he is superior to it. In the third scene you were right, but you swallowed some of your words so that it was not clear.

When we speak about the philosophy of this part, we will see that there are many philosophical ways and each way is right - even the materialistic way is right, when it concerns



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matter, but when it begins to speak about something other than matter, even about a play and tries to apply its calculations, it is wrong. There is nothing wrong in the human thought, but there are wrong applications of the thinking to the human life. (This comes from Dr. Steiner). In this play Kirilov has the right idea that love is pain, and it must be killed (Schopenhauer), but he uses it to incorrectly that it becomes wrong. If you apply any of these philosophical ideas wrongly, you will always open the last page and say, "I can't." Your "I can't," is the key to everything, and if this is really imitated by you, it is the point where the audience must cry immediately.

Ellen Van Volkenberg as Mrs. Stavrogin: We have to rehearse the last scene more. There is one line which can be explored - this is to be more in him spiritually and to see in him more. Very often you look past him, and then we feel that you think of him, or consider him. Imagine that you cannot get away from looking at him - psychologically it is different to be in him rather than to be in and around him.

Peter as Drosdov: It is correct except that when Lisa becomes hysterical, you must be more humanly frightened.

#### Atmospheres:

Scene I - Fiery Conspiracy. Scene II - Impending disaster. Unsolved problems. Sharp, metal disaster - knives



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are hanging over him. Staccato life. Daylight. Scene III - Fight in darkness. Dramatic fight. Heavy fight. Scene IV - Ghosts flying in the night air - around us and through us, away and towards, they are everywhere. Everywhere ghosts and strange spirits are flying - the furniture is moving towards you. Scene V - A fairy tale world - nothing real - everything leading somewhere further and furtheraway. If it is a castle, then there are innumerable rooms. If it is a river, it flows through the whole fairy tale country. Nothing has a definite end. An atmosphere of listening, seeing, hearing - everything greater than on the earth. - the archetypes of everything we find on the earth. You can breathe there with a fully expanded chest. Scene VI - Bridge - storm, rain, wind, and chaos inside and outside. Real concrete chaos - no spiritual qualities, no ghosts, no fairy tale, no nightmare - the real chaos. Scene VII - Fight - night - intimate - tense atmosphere - legato - powerful, intimate fight between two beings. Cold light, like needles in the air which tears us to pieces. No warmth. Cold, open plain - empty - false, cold lamps - great activity in this emptiness. Scene IX - The Meeting scene - main atmosphere of activity, sometimes clever, sometimes blind, but activity. Everyone wants to act. Scene X - Governor's office - it is the atmosphere of disaster - it has happened - everything has fallen down - the revolution is there - catastrophe is there - danger,



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fear, catastrophe - sharp, staccato, like snow crystals.

Scene XI - Running away from danger - to save oneself - to escape, each in his own way. Stavrogin is escaping into the other world, if possible, therefore, he sits so quietly.

Scene XII - Torture chamber - stagnating - small room without air - books - death itself is already here in the room - torture chamber without air, without the possibility to move or breathe - everything dies, and dies, and dies - dirty green air - slippery cold walls - dirty green smoke. Scene XIII - Painful emptiness - separation - loneliness. Both characters are not quite here - they have slipped over the normal threshold.

#### THE IDEAL PERFORMANCE:

The ideal performance can be compared with the human being - the performance as a human being - the performance has a visible, audible, tangible body just as a human being has. The setting, the colors, the voices, everything we see, hear, and touch is the body of the performance, but it is a corpse unless it is filled with the soul. In the human being the soul is everything which has to do with the feelings, the emotions, sympathy, antipathy, etc. - this is the realm of the soul. In the performance it is the atmospheres - one is fiery, another is cold, another is nightmare - just the same as what is going on in us. Then the other thing, the third thing, is the spirit of the performance - with which ideas the performance



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was put on the stage - what we are going to see - what are the ideas of the performance, the thoughts, the ideals of the performance. The content - the world of ideas - that is the spirit of the performance. Just the same as with the human being. For instance, one can have in his spirit the ideal to help everyone whom he meets in life. That is his ideal, but when he meets another person, he forgets about this and the world of ideals is gone and the spirit is killed. The spirit is one thing, the soul - which can kill or help the spirit - is another, and the body is a different thing again. If the body is without the control of the spirit or the soul, it is an animal, or if it sleeps, it is a plant. If the soul is temperamental, you will feel that the body is torn to pieces even. If the body is filled with spiritual ideals, the body is different.

Just so on the stage - if we neglect the ideas of the body of the performance which the audience sees and hears, we will be quite different than if we cherish the ideas. If we forget the soul, we may have a wonderful mechanism - it will be a living machine without a soul - without a soul the highest idea will become a machine. The soul actually gives the human qualities to everything. A performance cannot be human without a soul. It can make a tremendous impression as a beautiful mechanism, but without soul it is not a human production. Without soul and spirit is is a galvanized



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corpse, and nothing more. If you will think of these three things which can be compared to the human being, you will always understand them in relation to the play.